



## European journal of American studies Reviews 2017-3

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12352>

ISSN: 1991-9336

### Publisher

European Association for American Studies

### Electronic reference

Katerina Delikonstantinidou, « Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2017-3, Online since 29 November 2017, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12352>

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# Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique*

Katerina Delikonstantinidou

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- 1 Robert F. Reid-Pharr, *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique*
- 2 New York: New York University Press, 2016. Pp. 257. ISBN: 978-1-4798-4362-6
- 3 Katerina Delikonstantinidou
- 4 If I could use only one word to describe Professor Reid-Pharr's latest contribution to Cultural Studies and, more specifically, to Black (Cultural) Studies scholarship, I would opt for uncomfortable. The book, bearing the gripping and suggestive title *Archives of Flesh*, is uncomfortable in at least two senses: it can certainly be a source of disquiet for the unwary reader, unaccustomed to projects as iconoclastic and polemic as this one, but it also sits ill at ease with(in) the very discursive, intellectual, and sociopolitical realm of/in which it necessarily partakes—that is, the humanities and human sciences. To his credit, the writer alerts us early on, from the book's first pages, to the fact that the experience of reading *Archives of Flesh* will be one of defamiliarization; defamiliarization with regard to the *modus operandi* of Western (liberal) humanism, its cultural practices and products. "[M]uch what paces and structures this work are equal measures of displeasure and distrust" toward Western humanism's "philosophical and critical systems" and their constitutive conceits, Reid-Pharr quite frankly announces in the Introduction (4), thus setting the tone and mood for the ensuing discussion and for its underlying (and ever explicit political) agenda.
- 5 Precisely because of its provocative and confrontational character and approach to the specific issues it takes up, as well as, more broadly, to the field imaginary of (Black) Cultural Studies and to humanism—against whose established contours it resolutely pushes, *Archives of Flesh* is not an easy book to read, and, by extension, not an easy book to review. Not that it is not well-written and readable; on the contrary. It is just that, in order to do justice to the complex interrelated subjects it treats, it too gets somewhat

convoluted at points. Yet, these very elements that can at times irritate the reader are what render the book particularly rewarding. After all, in our line of work, it is not often that we light upon a piece of scholarly criticism that is capable of also engaging the reader meaningfully on an affective, almost visceral, level. If the writer's intention with/ in this book was to summon up and attend to "both the mind *and* the flesh" in his "efforts to imagine a modern, future-oriented, and indeed post-humanist Black Studies" (13), as he claims, then I would dare say that he has succeeded in more ways than one.

- 6 It is indeed the foregrounding of the "flesh," especially the flesh of black and/or female subjects, enslaved and/or colonized persons, and its recognition as an actor of history as well as an agent of resistance and change that lies at the heart of Reid-Pharr's unmistakably ethical, "extra-philosophical archival project," as he dubs it (15). That is, his project of imagining and developing the beginnings of an anti-colonialist, anti-white supremacist, and anti-misogynist critical method that will respond to "the pressing need . . . [for] a post-humanist archival practice," which, for the writer, is almost synonymous to the need for a "structural change in American and European intellectual life" (7-9). "Flesh," human animality and the "anthropophorous animal" (or Man-bearing animal)—or, to put it more simply and jargon free, the systematically repressed corporeal/material aspects of human beings, is presented and employed in this book not only as the source and basis for the "self-conscious articulation of counternarratives of human subjectivity" (9), but, more ambitiously still, as a potential means by which to dismantle and disarticulate the divide between ("white, Western, propertied, universal") Man and ("non-white, Eastern, property-less, local female") human (12). "Flesh" is weaponized in the context of Reid-Pharr's polemic critique against the anti-human, racist and sexist ideological protocols of Western humanism which, according to him, are the same "protocols of violence that underwrite the structures of so-called Western modernity" (41), with roots deep in colonization, slavery/slave culture, and the Atlantic trade.
- 7 The specific "archives of flesh" in which the writer's (multiply alternative) post-humanist archival work is grounded are drawn from a history of "intimate interaction between African American and Spanish intellectuals," a history exhibiting strong anti-fascist inflections, that, as we learn, spans several decades—although the book focuses on the period between the "splendid little" Spanish-American War of 1898 and the early second half of the twentieth century (11). Each of the book's five chapters, as well as its conclusion, in fact examines different yet obviously related moments and aspects of what Reid-Pharr calls "the African American Spanish archive" (11). At the same time, each exhibits the writer's hardly disclosed fascination with an ostensibly hybrid Spain and its function as a rich (re)source from which (dis- or counter-)articulations of human (especially black and/or female) subjectivity, resistance, and change can be rescued; with "off-white" Spain as a "flesh-y" site of "promise and possibility" (11) for a much-hoped-for transgression, and even erasure, of imagined boundaries compartmentalizing and thus delimiting (human animal) bodies and the spaces in which they reside and which they constantly traverse.
- 8 More specifically, Chapter One, self-explanatorily titled "War Archive," offers a dense meditation on the—typically unacknowledged—interrelations and interarticulations of gender, race (and class), aesthetic and war practices within the context of African Americans' participation in the war of 1898 and in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. Despite its rather meandering presentation, I found the chapter's contiguous discussions of domestic space as "always already war space" (31); post-slavery "New Negro"

ideological and aesthetic premises, structures, and manifestations; and the mutual imbrication between fascism (in its several twentieth century iterations) and slavery, colonization, and forced migration fascinating. More than that, Reid-Pharr's criticism of the ways in which contemporary chronicling and memorialization practices inflected by Western humanism's disciplinary protocols, with a focus on the case of the reception of African American nurse Salaria Kea, serve to coerce, sanitize, and obscure generous contributions to the human archive is powerful and insightful to say the least.

- 9 Chapter Two, on "Lorca's Deathly Poetics," traces generally under-researched aspects of Federico García Lorca's conflictual relationship with a "flattening and leveling," Western and predominantly "white," modernity (and modernism), as well as with the logics and modes of its attendant humanist structures (75). Reid-Pharr points our attention to the "double consciousness" that underwrites Lorca's oeuvre (73), while special emphasis is placed on the artist's manifestly equivocal stance, not only toward the idea and reality of "two Spains" (the modern and the traditional one) as well as, more particularly, toward Andalusian domesticity, but also toward the (animal) humanity and subjectivity of gypsies, women, urban homosexuals, and blacks. Although the writer is critical of Lorca's "fantasies of African primitivism" (108) and his apparent inability (even failure) to acknowledge and decipher the potency of the dis-articulations and counter-narratives of his African American interlocutors (often embedded in complex processes of cultural masking), he generously grants that "the dialogical ethics that bind Lorca to his African American peers" can open up the way for "alternative, indeed post-humanist responses to the processes of modernity encompassed within the Atlantic imaginary" (75).
- 10 Continuing in a similar vein of thought and critique, in Chapter Three, Reid-Pharr turns his focus on Langston Hughes and on what the latter's encounter with Spain early in the twentieth century reveals about the well-hidden dark corners of "Manhood's world-making projects" and their apparently (although rarely acknowledged) life-affirming powers (119). The writer's analysis of Hughes' treatment of the figures of the slave, the sailor, the black, and, especially, the prostitute in a number of his works is more than illuminating and deserving of special praise. The forgoing figures not only spell out an alternative "flesh-y" human subjectivity for Hughes, Reid-Pharr admits, but they also emerge as building blocks of his own post-humanist critical project, insofar as "their modes of unheralded articulation get as close as anything to unveiling the complexity of Western humanism's most obscurantist discursive structures" (131). "Langston's Adventures in the Dark" is/are round out with a brief yet brisk account of Hughes' biography, and his very flesh for that matter, as a site where the dynamics of Manhood and anthropophorous animality play out—ultimately, and productively, in favor of an obstinately indecisive flesh that eschews regimentation.
- 11 Chapters Four and Five discuss, respectively, Chester Himes' and Richard Wright's complicated, multivalent, and, according to Reid Pharr, "vexed" relationships to Spain (27)—both the Spain they had initially assumed/imagined and the Spain whose irreducible realities eventually, and bitterly, disappointed them. In the case of Himes, the dis-ease that marks the artist's multiply narrativized experience of Spain is interpreted by Reid-Pharr as essentially Himes' dis-ease and horror in view of the "mechanics of slave society" that he found impinging upon his own life and career in the country; mechanics half-disguised as modern and humanist "normative ideologies of order" (178). Himes responds and resists desperately yet forcefully by pressing against the very "Man/human binary" undergirding the said ideologies. Black (Cultural) Studies can benefit

immeasurably by the specific manner in which Himes articulated his resistance Reid Pharr stresses; that is, “by embracing the charge of bestiality, allowing the name calling embedded in the phrase ‘black beast’ . . . to make evident the profoundly anti-human vulgarity that lies at the heart of the common sense of white [supremacist and racist] liberal respectability,” as well as “the many structural cleavages and absurdities that hold it together” (156). On the other hand, Wright’s dis-ease with the realities he encounters in Spain takes the form of a peculiar constellation of reflections in which the artist at once criticizes and ratifies the ideological assemblies on which Western modernity and humanism are built, and in which he at once rescripts and “rehearses many of the tropes associated with slavery and colonization—“tropes of capture, exploitation, abuse, and complicity” (182). Notwithstanding the quite problematic gendered and intellectualist aspects of his critique, Wright’s reflections throw into sharp relief the inherent instability of the Man/human split and make for a very useful lesson in the nuanced art of “paying attention” (213)—a lesson of particular relevance to the vision of “a radical Black Studies and an invigorated Critical Archive Studies” (156) that *Archives of Flesh* adumbrates.

- 12 No less erudite that the rest of the book, yet more overtly attuned to a personal key, Reid-Pharr’s Conclusion wraps up his critique by means of a contrapuntal reading of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* and his *Las Meninas* series (reiterations/reinterpretations of Diego Velázquez’s homonymous 1656 painting) with Lynn Nottage’s tragicomic historicist play also named *Las Meninas*. The writer’s examination of “the multiple intertextualities binding Picasso and Nottage,” as he puts it (28) issues into a call for a much more emphatic, systematic, and methodical “paying of attention” than the one currently practiced within the humanities and human sciences to the specific historical conditions of production and consumption of the (master)works that we regard as the pinnacles of (Western) culture, as well as to the highly sophisticated ideological and aesthetic conventions of their reception, especially to the extent that these feature deep roots in “the systems of exploitation and *dehumanization* perfected and modernized within the structures of colonization and enslavement” (217; emphasis in the original). The kind of corrosive reiteration—the repetition of repetition (of repetition . . .) that destabilizes the Man-versus-human logics of Western humanism—practiced by Picasso and Nottage is one of the few “improbable tools” we have in our disposal in our struggle to shape our histories anew Reid-Pharr suggests and urges us convincingly to make good use of it (230).
- 13 Eloquent, insightful, and fascinating at points as it may be, *Archives of Flesh* is not exactly intended for the uninitiated to the precincts, rhetorics, and charms of the “progressive” end of the Cultural Studies spectrum, particularly its post-humanist branch. A certain familiarity with the basics of post-humanist critique is required for a full appreciation of Reid-Pharr’s path-breaking, horizon-opening project. Still, it is worth the try. If only because it diverges notably from the usual scholarly practice and intellectual experimentation to which most of us are more or less accustomed. Prepare for a refreshing reading experience!